

Commissioner's Weekly Wrap Up

DCS Communications Office

December 23, 2004

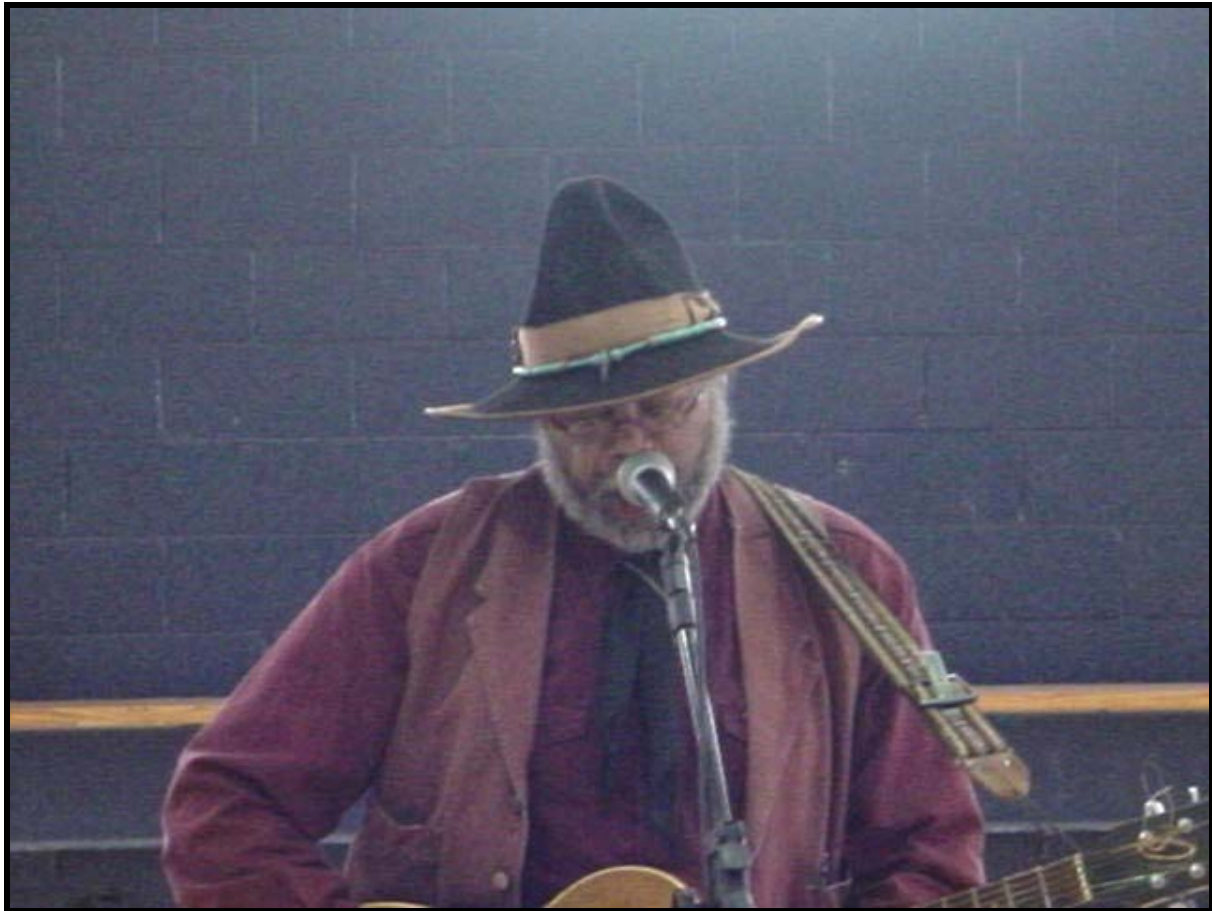
(This week's Weekly Wrap Up is being sent on Thursday, Dec. 23, because of the Christmas holiday.)

The Week Ahead

Tue., Dec. 28 – The Commissioner attends an adoption celebration in Hamilton County.

Heroes and Hard Times: Exploring the Roots of African-American Folk Culture

Submitted by Carol Muscarnero, Personnel Analyst 2, Taft Youth Development Center



Students at Taft Youth Center were treated to an entertaining and informative assembly program on December 15, when professional folk singer, storyteller and historian James “Sparky” Rucker and his wife, Rhonda, performed “Heroes and Hard Times.” Accompanied

by guitar, banjo, spoons, bones and harmonica, they provided a Tennessee history lesson with a variety of songs about the Civil War era, coal mining and the origin of blues music.

The Ruckers have toured folk festivals throughout the country and internationally. They have also appeared on NPR's *Prairie Home Companion* and released 11 albums.

Taft Students Visit “Realville”

Submitted by Carol Muscarnero, Personnel Analyst 2, Taft Youth Development Center



Staff of Taft Youth Development Center, along with the Southeast Tennessee Human Resources Agency, teamed up to offer Taft students a visit to “Realville,” an activity where students face the economic and personal decisions of everyday adults. Students were given scenarios that included employment, salary, family and more. They then had to visit booths in order to determine how to spend their income. The different booths represented necessary living expenses, like clothing, utilities, daycare, automotive, groceries, insurance, mortgage/rent, back to school costs, income from second jobs and discretionary costs. As the students visited each booth, they had to choose between name brand/expensive and generic/more economical purchases. This program is part of the Youth Enrichment Services (YES) program, which is aimed toward helping at-risk young people achieve academic and employment success.

Try

Submitted by Melody Valentine, CQI Coordinator, East Region

I started with the Department straight out of college in 2000. I came here with a rosy view of life and a desire to change the world. I quickly figured out that I alone couldn't change the world. As a foster care worker, you sometimes get so wrapped up in deadlines and meeting requirements that you can almost lose sight of the purpose of being a social worker. We obviously don't get into working with society for the money [however, our raises are very nice, thanks] and we don't get into social work for the glory – just watch the evening news. However, there are times when you look at some of the kids that you have worked with and realize why you do what you do.

I worked in foster care for 3 ½ years with the Department in Roane County. The last year and half, I had a specialized caseload of cases that we were looking toward termination of parental rights. I had three siblings on my caseload who were removed for environmental neglect. The children (two girls ages 4 and 3, and their six-month old brother) came into our office completely filthy. The children had dirt on their faces, unclean clothes, rotten teeth and blisters on their feet from wearing shoes too small for them. The CPS worker went to the local Family Dollar Store (the only store in Kingston) and bought clothes for the kids. We put the kids in the sink in the break room and washed them off. The kids were delayed, and we had trouble understanding what they were saying to us. That night they were placed in a DCS foster home in Knox County. A single woman took the kids in. When they called her that night, she was a bit reluctant. She said that she did not know if she could handle three small children by herself. But the foster mother was heartbroken of the story of these children and told the worker, "I'll try".

I later picked up their cases after they were transferred several times. When I got their cases, the previous case managers felt that the biological mother would not be able to complete a plan and maintain enough to get the kids home. Shortly after taking the cases, I had the same feeling. This mother loved these kids, but would not change her living habits and environment. She wasn't a bad person, but just could not understand how to be a good mother and put the kids first. I really felt bad for this mother because she was limited, and I knew she loved the kids. It broke my heart to tell her that because of the length of time in custody and the conditions of her home and environment that we had decided to pursue termination of parental rights. I explained to her the option of surrendering her rights as well, but she cried and said that she would not give up. I encouraged her to follow her heart and to most of all think of the kids and what she felt was best for them. I told her that is what makes a good mother. She continued to visit and work toward getting the kids back.

We had Foster Care Review Board that next month. The biological mother came, as did the foster mother. While discussing the children's issues and problems, the mother asked if the foster mother could adopt if she surrendered. I told her that by the time we got the surrender in court, the kids would have been with the foster mother for a year and she would be able to adopt if she chose to. The foster mother with tears in her eyes said, "Yes, I would love to adopt the kids." The mother, foster mother and I worked out a plan to send pictures and gifts through me as a way to maintain contact. To this day, I am still facilitating this exchange.

This foster mother has recently adopted the children. Although all the kids have some delays and disabilities, they are all very happy, beautiful children. The kids are in dance, gymnastics and piano, and are well-rounded and very pleasant children. They have a wide-open future and will be able to accomplish anything. I was able to attend the adoption party that their new mother threw for them. It was amazing to see these children now and how different they appear. The life these kids now have is a full life. They have been truly blessed, as is the foster mother who was able to adopt these children. I also believe that their biological mother will be blessed, as well, for doing what she has done for her children.

I look back at their situation and I smile. I think of how two words changed three children's lives. "I'll try." If we all tried just a little each day, what all could we change. These children may have resentments toward their biological mother when they get older. However, their adoptive mother can tell them that their biological mother was just "trying" to do what was best for them. So in 2005, when you get stressed, down and feel like the job is too much, just remember you don't lose anything by "trying." It is a process that is easy to do and you may be the only one "trying" for a particular child. Just don't forget that the children and families we work with have feelings too and maybe they have not had someone "trying" for them. Our job is to "try" for them.

"Building Families – One Child at a Time"

Abstracted from a press release issued on December 20

As the Tennessee Department of Children's Services concludes its "Building Families – One Child at a Time" initiative, the Department has successfully finalized 361 adoptions, with an additional 73 estimated to be finalized by the end of the year.

"Building Families" has been the Department's extended recognition and celebration of November's National Adoption Awareness Month – a time when state governments, communities, businesses, organizations, families and individuals celebrate adoption as a viable, positive and proactive way to build families. DCS opted to maximize this opportunity by continuing the spirit, fervor and mission of the month through the end of the year.

"In striving to meet the needs of children and families in Tennessee, the Department sees the mission of 'Building Families – One Child at a Time' as an unyielding, year-long effort," said Commissioner Viola P. Miller. "We support the mission of National Adoption Awareness Month, and our employees put positive outcomes for all children at the forefront of our efforts every day."

DCS regional offices have held a range of events during "Building Families – One Child at a Time," including adoption fairs, adoption finalizations, special events for children in foster care and more. Several events were recently held throughout the state that reflect the Department's continuous commitment to help ensure positive outcomes for adoptable children in foster care.

In the Memphis area, the Shelby County regional DCS office coordinated eight adoption finalizations on Monday, Dec. 20, with Chancellor Walter Evans presiding. In what was planned as a three-day blitz, an estimated 41 adoptions were finalized this week.

In Nashville, two final events of the “Building Families” initiative included one of the last adoption finalizations of 2004 and a forum on the adoption process. On Monday, Dec. 20, Judge Muriel Robinson, of the 4th Circuit Court in Nashville, finalized four adoptions of children who have been in DCS’s full guardianship. Judge Robinson graciously added this date to her docket in a true showing of commitment to this cause, as the final scheduled date on her docket to complete adoptions this year was on December 7.

DCS also presented “Streamlining the Adoption Process,” a meeting where nearly 60 key voices in adoption from across the state convened. Individuals invited included members of the DCS Core Leadership Team, DCS adoption staff, workers from the Center for Adoption and representatives of private provider agencies. The gathering focused on key departmental adoption issues, including post-adoption services, adoption assistance rates and more.

“This was an opportunity to gather some of the most seasoned adoption experts in this state to discuss best practices to streamline the process so children achieve permanency in a shorter timeframe,” said Elizabeth Black, DCS executive director of child permanency. “We have made progress in this area this year, most notably with a new rule on expedited appeals and the expansion of adoption assistance, but we have more work to accomplish. This forum is the another step in the right direction.”

In the Chattanooga area, 11 families also finalized adoptions on Monday. Four Hamilton County Circuit Court judges – Judge Jacqueline F. Schulten, Judge Samuel H. Payne, Judge L. Marie Williams and Judge W. Neil Thomas, III – added special dockets today to bring closure to families who hoped to complete adoptions before the holidays.

“This is one of the most fulfilling aspects of my job,” said Judge Thomas. “Adoption gives stability that would not otherwise be there for children who have been in the foster care system.”

Core Leadership

**CORE Leadership Meeting
Elizabeth Black, Presiding
December 21, 2004**

Children’s Rights letter dated Dec. 3rd.

Audrey Corder provided an update on psychotropic medication concerns. Tricia Henwood has completed the requested information from Elizabeth Driver regarding training, monitoring and more. We are still in the process of hiring a child psychiatrist.

Petrina Jones-Jesz submitted prototypes of Brian A. QA/CQI reports currently in development to Elizabeth Driver and Doug Diamond on December 20.

Randal Lea reported that he and Tom Catron of the Vanderbilt Center of Excellence visited Dr. Paul Stratton in Lexington, Ky. Bluegrass Mental Health Cooperative, which houses the Children's Review Program in Kentucky, is open to discussion about a branch operation in Tennessee. Centers of Excellence will provide medical consultation when indicated. Lea suggests about \$ 75,000 of the '04-'05 needs assessment funds be set aside for research and planning toward this end, with an eye toward a larger contract for next year to accomplish a new level system and a new child placement and reimbursement system. Using Bluegrass and its existing software can save the Department up to one year in implementation time, as opposed to using a new vendor from scratch. Lea, Bonnie Hommich and the Commissioner will meet with Children's Program Review staff in Mid-January.

The Department needs an utilization review (UR) process. Lea stated that it would take approximately 90 days to do a UR in all 12 regions. We want to transport the idea of rightsizing to child placement. We want every child in the right placement that is least restrictive environment with appropriate services.

Executive Director Reports on Regional Visits

Randal Lea – Southeast. Lea reported that during his monthly visit he discussed that shared accountability with Central Office is increasing. Data will become real in January as the kick-off for baseline data will be January 1.

Audrey Corder – Knox. Corder has scheduled monthly visits and biweekly conference calls with Knox to share information from data. Judy Cole stated that Knox asked for technical assistance on building a cross-functional team. A meeting has been scheduled for December 22 to address this issue.

Brenda Bell – Davidson. Bell has been working with Davidson on the MR transition to DMRS. She stated Davidson and Shelby have the largest population of young MR adults that need to be transitioned.

Paul Montebello – South Central. Montebello said he was working with the RA on understanding the Family-to-Family and Chapin Hall data. A meeting will be held on January 13 with team leaders to review this information.

The remaining executive directors are expected to report on their regional visits during the next Core Leadership meeting.

State CQI

Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) is a philosophy and set of techniques that allows service providers to look at their activities and task performance and create plans for improvement.

CQI is a process by which all staff is involved in the evaluation of the efficiency and effectiveness of services provided by stakeholders by DCS. Evaluation involves the examination of the Department's internal system, procedures and outcomes; the examination

of input from participants, and the examination of relationships and interactions between DCS and other stakeholders.

CQI teams are problem solving and decision-making teams. The teams must remain strength-based and solution-focused. Meetings will result in the identification of needs, goals and available resources, as well as strengths of the program, the staff and the participants. Plans will be formulated that will build on those strengths. Areas needing improvement are identified and discussed; action plans are developed, and strategies are implemented to improve service delivery.

Each region will be required to submit their own individualized CQI plans to the Central Office Division of Quality Assurance and Continuous Quality Improvement no later than December 31. These plans should include team structure, including facilitators and scribes. The plan should also include a schedule of meeting times.

Daryl Chansuthus would like the state CQI team to meet monthly initially and gradually meet on a quarterly basis.

Quality Service Review Process

DCS leadership is in the early stages of developing a qualitative child review process that is a component of DCS's Path to Excellence Implementation Plan for meeting the outcomes, goals and strategies for quality assurance and continuous quality improvement. This qualitative child review process will build upon similar strategies already being used by the Tennessee Commission on Children and Youth (C-PORT), the federal Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) and the Quality Service Review (QSR). Goals of the qualitative child review process are to both provide an assessment of children and families receiving and the quality of practice for these children and families, as well as to facilitate ongoing quality assurance, systemic development and practice improvement.

The development of DCS's qualitative child review process will be a collaborative effort, completed by DCS child welfare professionals, administrators and C-PORT, with possible support from the Technical Assistance Committee (TAC) and the monitor for Brian A., as well as other possible representatives. Human Systems and Outcomes, Inc will facilitate development of the qualitative child review process. The child review protocol will focus on key elements of child and family status and the performance of the service system, and will be reflective of key functions in the child welfare practice model utilized by DCS. Some areas of focus in the protocol will include the current status of children and caregivers, progress and outcomes achieved, and performance of important child practice functions.

Performance Evaluations

William Haynes explained that a strong emphasis would be placed on performance evaluations. He explained that the Personnel Office is trying to change the culture, or perception, of performance evaluations, stating that evaluations have now ranged from staff not receiving evaluations at all or being rated extremely high as 4s or 5s in all categories. The Department wants to use performance evaluations in the way it was intended. Personnel and legal staff will begin training sessions for supervising departments on job plans, interim reviews and progressive discipline in January 2005. The schedule is yet to be determined and

will be at least a six-hour session. It will take approximately six months to train supervisors in each region. The training will also include Central Office staff.

Employee Recognition System

William Haynes stated there has been research that has tied performance evaluations to employee recognition programs have yielded better results. Haynes stated he would be looking to start this process.

Limited English Proficiency

Tennessee is becoming more diverse. The federal mandate states that if a state receives federal dollars, it must have a plan to provide fair and equal services for people with limited English proficiency (LEP). Arlene Martin and Servella Terry are on a workgroup to discuss these issues. William Haynes would like a broader workgroup to include people who are in the field. Executive directors have been charged with the responsibility of identifying staff within their group to be on the Central Office LEP workgroup. The names of the identified staff need to be emailed to Haynes no later than Thursday. The Central Office LEP workgroup will meet in January 2005. The Department needs to translate its most important documents, as well as signs and posters, into Spanish as well as signs and posters. Andrea Turner stated she is working on translating brochures or recruitment, foster care and CPS into Spanish.

DMRS

Brenda Bell announced that there have been a total of five young MR adults that have been placed with DMRS. The annual cost for the five young adults is \$275,704.



Always bear in mind that your own resolution to succeed is more important than any one thing.

-Abraham Lincoln

Joy is prayer. Joy is strength. Joy is love. Joy is net of love by which you can catch souls.

-Mother Teresa

